

Director Neil Triffett on the MIFF Premiere Fund-supported World Premiere, *Emo The Musical*

What happens when a brooding, moody high-school emo falls for a happy, God-loving Christian believer? We sit down with *Emo the Musical* director Neil Triffett and find out about the sweetly satirical story about tolerance, individuality and harmonising.



1) Tell us about your journey as a writer/director leading up to your debut feature *Emo the Musical* - both creatively and also how the financing came together for the film?

Before making *Emo*, I'd made many short films that were darker and more experimental in tone. After graduating VCA, I worked mainly making videos for community groups, particularly around youth engagement and disability. When I began to itch to make my own work again, Lee Matthews (who had produced my graduating film, a social-realist comedy about shoplifting in the 90's), talked about what we could do together. We wanted to make something different to what we'd made before: something that was joyful but still relevant. I started scripting the short film version of *Emo* about a disassociated Emo youth, which I loved, but heck, it was a musical, so it had to be fun, right? We made it with the help of a beautiful volunteer cast and crew, and the final product was selected for the Berlinale. After that, we were able to get development funds to write the feature. We have had a charmed life, attracting financial support from Film Victoria, Screen Australia, MIFF, and private investors, in the space of a few years.

2) Not only are you the writer/director of *Emo* - you wrote the songs as well! Where do you see *Emo* fitting into the spectrum of musicals, high school or otherwise?

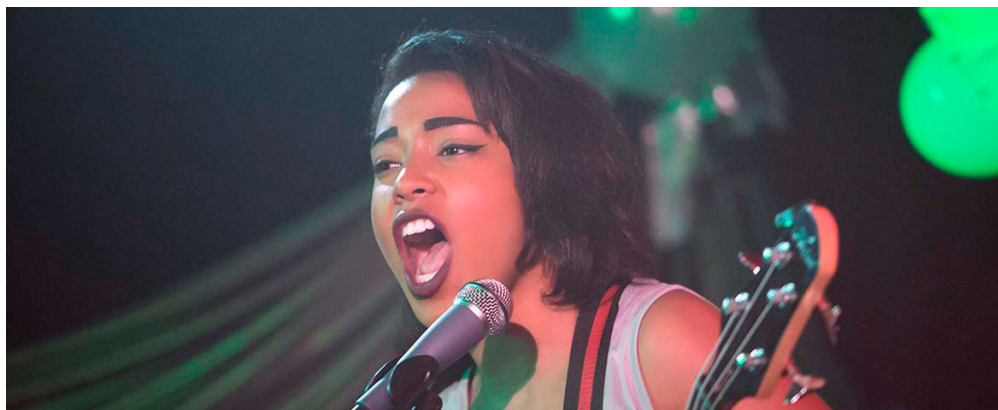
Emo is consciously a mix of the musical spectrum, which has a lot to do with the characters in it. The Emos don't want to be in a musical so don't break into song randomly. They're in *Once* or *Sing Street*. The Christians are more open to the razzle-dazzle of the whole thing and are content to be in the *Sound of Music*. But as the plot progresses, rules break and people jump styles. We have everything from Mumford and Sons type numbers all the way through to

the tripe you'll hear at an high school Eisteddfod. The film is meta, but it's not a spoof. There's also a personal element to the film, which is one of the big differences between *Emo* and *High School Musical*. There's no dancing Zac Efron in our movie, mainly because he wasn't available, but also because it would get in the way of the emotional elements. This is the story of eight kids working out who they are, and it's ridiculous and often heightened, but it doesn't forget that it's a personal story.

3) What was it like finding and working with the cast members – did their characters evolve over during the process?

It was important to find young actors with comic timing and the ability to identify with flawed characters. Finding non-musical theatre actors willing to sing was also a challenge. Luckily, Thea McLeod, our casting agent, who also works for *Neighbours*, knows many of the young actors in Australia. Working with the cast was much like a drama. We discussed group dynamics, including why characters had joined their groups and what they were hiding from. Our characters are not funny because of their oddness, they're funny because of their ignorance of how odd they are, and it takes a certain conviction to pull that off. Having the prototype of the short film version was both a blessing and a curse.

The short film cast had aged by the time the feature arrived, and we had to choose where we did and didn't want to repeat ourselves. The feature is darker and we couldn't maintain the sugarness of the short for 90 minutes without being disrespectful to certain elements, so we opted to ground some performances. Rahart Adams as Bradley is a good example. He was so physically different to Zak Marrinan from the short film that we needed new ways for him to control a group. Our discussions resulted in a more troubled, more-glam, more-sexualised, but hopefully as funny performance. On set, the energy of a young cast is amazing, but with many of them on their first feature (and it being mine too), there were many nerves as well. Much of my work was making light of the situation, trying to make actors forget they were making a movie. I think I performed as much as they did.



How much do you empathise with the teenage psyche? Is *Emo* a way of exorcising some of your own high school experiences?

I was twenty-seven years old when we were filming *Emo*, so it really wasn't that long ago that I was a teenager. You're told you can do everything, but you can't, you have freedom, but you don't know what to do with it, your parents have worked so hard to give you a world but it's screwed up and you feel bad about not wanting it. You're stuck with the eternal question "If this is gonna suck so much, how do I exist in it?" *Emo* is definitely about how I was as a teenager. It's not pure like *High School Musical*, but on the other hand, though there's sex and drugs hanging around like in darker high school films, they are often things "those other kids were doing". I'd avoid calling it a complete exorcism of my High school life, as there's a fair amount of holy war that happens in our film's school. We didn't have holy wars at my high school in Tasmania. Only the kids at Private Schools could afford extracurricular activities like that.

What advice would you give to other aspiring writers and directors – what are some crucial sessions you've learned along the way for your first feature film?

You can never really be prepared for your first feature. Surviving it is about boring things like organisation and perseverance. The idea and talent are only as important as your ability to write for four hours a day, and fill in spread sheets until late into the night. It's not sexy. Practice your skills so you can rely on them when things go wrong. Surround yourself with people you trust because they'll always look after you better than those with insane skills. Apart from that, read and watch a lot, but don't obsess over movies cause it'll feel way to important when you make them, and that's a creativity-killer.

Emo the Musical will be screening as part of the Melbourne International Film Festival. Neil Triffett is a guest of the festival.